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19 September 1964

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Meeting in the Cabinet Room, the White House, 10:45 a.m.,
19 September 1964

1. The meeting called by Mr. Bundy last night for 10:00 in the Cabinet Room was postponed until 10:45. Present were Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Secretary Rusk, Secretary Ball, Ambassador Thompson, Secretary McNamara, Secretary Vance, General Wheeler, Carl Rowan, Mr. George Reedy, Mr. Bromley Smith and myself.
2. Mr. Rusk passed out a proposed press statement on the Tonkin incident. Mr. Bundy did likewise and Mr. McNamara did likewise. After some discussion, it was determined that Mr. McNamara's statement, as amended, would be proposed for the President's approval.
3. The President arrived at 11:00 a.m. and the discussion continued until 1:00 p.m. The President expressed some doubt as to whether there had in fact been any vessels of any kind in the area. Mr. McNamara pointed out various indicators and it was generally agreed that there had been unidentified vessels in the area. The President turned to me and asked me what I thought. I stated that from all of the evidence available it was evident to me that there had been vessels in the area, that this had been supported by the radar sightings from both ships including radar fixes, reports from the aircraft pilot, reports of the two sailors who stated that they saw silhouettes and some of the COMINT reports subsequently received. I stated, however, that I was unable to assert that they were naval vessels, or that they were a menace or that they had any hostile intent. I pointed out, however, that whether or not such targets were a menace or had hostile intent was a decision that could be made only at the time by the commander on the spot and the commander had made an affirmative decision in this respect. I stated that we would probably never know the actual facts as to threat or hostile intent on the part of the enemy. Several times during the discussion the President reverted to this point indicating that he still had doubt as to the propriety of the action by our commander. Rusk pointed out that the President had no choice since he was the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces but to publicly support the action taken no matter what his personal reservations might be. I stated that we should bear in mind that we had noted no evidence of a change in NVN intent -- since the August episode in the Gulf of Tonkin, the enemy had appeared to be both defensive oriented and apprehensive. I stated that it was possible

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that Sub-Unit 6 NVN Patrol had been over-zealous in shadowing operations on the Desoto patrol but that we could see no intent politically or militarily on the part of the NVN to be aggressive in this instance. I repeated, however, that the field commander on the spot was the only one qualified to make the decision at the time.

4. The discussion then reverted to whether or not the Desoto patrol should be immediately reinstituted, delayed for a number of days, or whether the 34-A operations should continue on schedule. McNamara, Vance and Wheeler were all in favor of postponing the 34-A operations but immediately start another three-day Desoto reconnaissance, then three days after they had been withdrawn to institute the maritime operations. Bundy was in favor of standing everything down for a week since this would be inclined to keep us out of trouble but at the same time keep the NVN's tense as to what our intentions might be. Secretary Ball thought we should take a long, hard look at exactly what we accomplished by the Desoto patrol, particularly in the light that they could be interpreted as being deliberately provocative. He raised the question as to what our course of action would be if we were to lose a destroyer and its 250-man complement. Could we justify the need for the patrols to this degree? Would the Administration's public image stand up as being thoughtful and resilient and deliberate under such circumstances? The President picked this thought up immediately and expanded on it forcefully and reasonably. He stated that we should be in a position of justifying both militarily and politically, the need for exposing ourselves to this sort of action. He suggested that we all read the Pearl Harbor report so that we would be confident that when we took actions and responded to actions we would have full, logical reasons, well thought out and so desired. He directed that McNamara prepare in most precise detail the arguments for and against these patrols from the military viewpoint. He wanted to know how they were conducted, what they accomplished, and what the end good was. He directed Secretary Rusk (who argued for continuation of patrols) to prepare the political reasons as to why they should be continued. The President directed that State and Defense plan ahead as to just what they would do both politically and militarily in all contingencies and how they would justify their actions under conditions of a serious military loss such as a destroyer. He then wanted Secretary Ball to act as Prosecuting Attorney to determine whether or not these arguments held water. The President agreed with General Taylor's view (and the view held by all of us) that lacking any clear evidence of aggressive intent on the part of the NVN's, there should be no retaliation as was executed in August. Finally, as to the Tonkin Gulf incident, it was agreed that no Desoto patrols and no 34-A operations would be conducted until

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further consultation and justification with the President. This was in no way a stand-down as such; it was purely to get everybody's ducks in a row in case the next operation turned on all the Christmas tree lights.

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Marshall S. Carter
Lieutenant General, USA
Acting Director

MSC:bec

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